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AUTHOR Cobern, William W.; Junaid, M. I.
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ABSTRACT

The use of student feedback as a method of improving university teaching was studied at the University of Sokoto, Nigeria. Students rated the lecturer, the lecturer's teaching ability, and the course. Of concern was whether students carefully and thoughtfully read the questionnaire items, and whether there was any evidence of spiteful or gratuitous responses. A total of 101 students rated six lecturers from the education, history, and geography departments. Results provide some evidence that students give honest and thoughtful feedback on teaching and course content. It seemed possible that students feared being equally honest about their lecturers. It is suggested that students need to be more thoroughly convinced of their anonymity. The questionnaire is appended. (SW)

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Student Evaluations of University Teaching

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Presented by:

Dr. Wm. W. Cobern
Mal. M. I. Junaid
Faculty of Education
University of Sokoto
NIGERIA

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A B S T R A C T .

This study revolved round the question: "Is University teaching poor ?" It is undoubtedly true that a good researcher is not necessarily a good teacher and since university lecturers are expected to be good researchers, it may not be wrong to assume that some of the teaching in the University is poor. But how best can we improve it ? This study focussed upon the use of students' feedback as one method of improving university teaching.

It represented a comprehensive view of teaching focussing on three categories pertaining to the lecturer, his teaching and his course respectively. These categories are based on a model derived from the work of Brophy and Good (1978)

According to this model the teacher should be perceived by his students as approachable, knowledgeable, professional and secure; his teaching technique lucid and organized and his course intellectually stimulating and of recognizable value.

The major purpose of the study was to provide preliminary answers to the questions: If students are asked to complete a course and teacher evaluation questionnaire, will they read and respond carefully and thoughtfully ? Will the students' responses be honest, neither spiteful, nor gratuitous ?

This study showed that useful students' feedback can be gathered for the improvement of teaching and content even though there was an indication that students feared being honest about the lecturers themselves. That is case enough that university teaching is much in need of improvement.

Teaching and the University

It is interesting to note that the primary function of an undergraduate University is to teach students. In this respect it differs not at all from primary and secondary schools. There is however a difference in the expectations society has of lecturers and University students. Primary and secondary teachers are expected to be good teachers. The students are expected to require much help from the teachers. The university lecturer is expected to be a good researcher and writer, "... and since undergraduates are supposed to be matured students, they are expected to pursue independent study with very little guidance from the professor" (Fafunwa, 1967 p. 110). As one would expect few university lecturers have had any teacher training. It is just not required of them. No less an educational authority than Fafunwa has stated the relationship between teaching and the university this way:-

"practically everyone connected with teacher education will easily agree that teachers at primary, secondary, technical and teacher training institutions need some professional training in education; but very few people will ever think of applying the same principle to university teachers. For too long we have taken it for granted that a university teacher does not need a professional education course in spite of the evidence to the contrary. Any university man, be he undergraduate or professor, knows that poor teaching abounds both in grade schools and at the university level. Traditionally a university teacher is a research scholar first and a teacher second;" (1967, p.110).

People who become lecturers are those of academic persuasion, those who want their discipline of interest to be their very career. They want to study their discipline, to research within it, and they want to write about it. Few really want to teach it. The University provides the circumstances in which the lecturer can pursue his objectives in exchange for the teaching of students. To the extent that the lecturers accomplish their own ends, the university gains credibility and favourable visibility. It can thus attract better undergraduate students. It is not too surprising then that faculty promotions are largely based on research and publication. Any regard for teaching quality is usually tokenism or lipservice since the usual university lacks the where withall (if not the will) to evaluate teaching (Singh, 1980; Stone, 1978).

Is university teaching poor? It would be difficult to validate an affirmation of such a general question, but one can safely generalize that a good researcher is not necessarily a good teacher. Furthermore the over all lack of concern about university teaching leads one to conclude that the quality of university teaching is at best desultory. It is undoubtedly true that one attribute of a good university student is that he can do independent work. Still, good teaching would at least make the students educational experience more pleasurable and quite possibly might redeem some good but late-blooming students.

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There are those who take advantage of the nurture-nature controversy of teaching by siding with the later and thus effectively absolving themselves of any responsibility for quality teaching.

Certainly there is an element of innate ability in teaching. To some degree teaching is an artform, but then so is science. If it were not so why is it that an aesthetic concept like "elegance" has become one of the converted superlatives identifying quality experimental design? Just as one can learn the heuristics of experimental design, one can learn the heuristics of teaching.

The Present Study

The focus of this present study is the use of student feedback as one method of improving university teaching. The systems analyst will affirm that procedural or methodological improvement commences with an evaluation of the current situation. A lecturer's students are in the best position to do such an evaluation since all teaching is for their benefit. The student's can best say whether or not a lecturer's teaching is effectively communicating with them. At this point some will object that student's perceptions are not wholly accurate. In other words the students may fail to perceive what the lecturer is actually doing. In that teaching is a matter of communication, this objection is beside the point. If the students fail for whatever reason to perceive what the lecturer is doing and saying, communication has broken down.

It is incumbent upon the teacher to do what he can to communicate. If communication breaks are known steps can be taken to improve teaching. This has been demonstrated in other places (Caffrey, 1969; Eble, 1970; Isaacson, 1964; McKeachie, 1971; Ratzlaff, 1980).

There are further objections more germane to this study. If the students are asked to complete a course and teacher evaluation questionnaire, will they read and respond carefully and thoughtfully? Will the student's responses be honest, neither spiteful nor gratuitous? When a study of student feedback questionnaires was first being discussed a number of the researcher's colleagues raised such objections. One even declined participation on the basis that a summary of spiteful student responses might "fall into the wrong hands!" At that point it became evident that an investigation into the grounds for such opposition to student feedback questionnaires was worth doing. This study was carried out to provide preliminary answers to the above two questions.

The Questionnaire

For the purpose of this study a questionnaire was constructed with three general categories of items. One category of items pertained to the lecturer, the second to his teaching, and the third to his course (see Table No. 1). The items are based on a model derived from the work of Brophy and Good (1978). For instance according to this model the teacher should be perceived by his students as approachable, knowledgeable, professional, and secure. His teaching technique should appear lucid and organised. His course

Questionnaire Items By Category

Lecturer	Teaching	Course
9	10	1
11	14	2
13	15	3
21	16	4
22	17	5
23	18	6
25	19	7
29		8
31		12
		20
		25
		27
		28
		30
TOTAL 10	7	14

TABLE NO 1

should be intellectually stimulating and of recognisable value.

A single statement formed each item. Students responded by marking a seven digit scale indicating a range from strong agreement with the statement to strong disagreement. As a pilot the questionnaire was purposefully made lengthy to facilitate post-study revision and refinement.

Methodology

The guiding questions of this study were:

1. Is there any evidence that the students carefully and thoughtfully read the questionnaire items?
2. Is there any evidence of spiteful or gratuitous responses?

The study was conducted in the exploratory data analysis mode of John Tukey (1977). The method basically asks, "Is there anything interesting to be seen in the data?" It does not seek to confirm or reject hypotheses, but to explore for possible relationships.

The data in this study was subjected to three analyses. For each lecturer the percent of possible responses was examined. It was felt that individual student differences would lead to a variety of responses. In other words a larger percentage of the possible responses would be used. A homogeneous response pattern would indicate a lack of response objectivity.

The three sections (i.e. Lecturer, Teaching, and Course) of the questionnaire were compared. It was felt that objective responses would lead to similar amounts of response variation in each of the three sections.

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Finally, the questionnaire contained opposing items (e.g. Items No. 1 and No. 5) the responses for which were examined for covariance. The opposing pairs had similar but oppositely stated content.

The participants in this study were six non-random faculty volunteers whose classes were dominated by education students (see Table No. 2). A few of the students were members of two classes involved.

Analysis

To begin with it should be noted that the questionnaires distributed to lecturers No. 5 and 6 were defective. As a result responses for Items No. 5, 7 and 20 were not collected for these two lecturers.

Table No. 3 shows the percent used of the possible responses per lecturer. The numbers of possible responses were 155, 203, and 224. The total for the study was 1233. The percentages of the responses used per instructor ranged from 47 percent to 66 percent. This table shows that overall students used 57 percent of the possible responses. If only one response were chosen per item by all students (i.e. maximum homogeneity) then the overall percentage of responses used would be 15. Although there is no external criterion with which to compare this figure of 57 percent it would seem that the response patterns were adequately heterogeneous when compared with a definitely homogeneous 15 percent.

Participants in the Study

<u>Tutor</u>	<u>Department</u>	<u>Class size</u>
1	Education	32
2.	Education	25
3.	Education	5
4	History	15
5.	History	9
6	Geography	15

TABLE NO 2

Summary of the
Use of the Seven Possible Responses Per Item

Lecturer	Class Size	Total Possible Responses	Percent of Responses Used
1	32	224	61
2	25	224	47
3	5	155	59
4	15	224	59
5	9	203	48
6	15	203	66
Total	101	1233	57

TABLE NO. 3

Table No. 4a-c shows the median response for each item for each lecturer. The items were grouped by the questionnaire sections of Lecturer , Teaching, and Course. The table also shows item and lecturer medians. The three parts of this table indicate that the responses interact with the questionnaire section.

The lecturer section is dominated by responses of 1 and 2, and is therefore quite homogenous. The other two sections show much more variety of response. The overall 57 percent of responses used is composed mainly of the responses to the Teaching and Course sections of the questionnaire.

Table No. 5a-d shows the four matrices of the questionnaire's four pairs of opposing items. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is given for each pair. The matrices show that the responses to opposing items do covary as one would expect. However the correlation coefficients are all less than the absolute value of .50. It is interesting to note that the stronger correlations are for the sequentially closer pairs of opposing items (see Table No. 5 c and d).

Conclusion

It was stated earlier that students' responses on a questionnaire about their lecturers and courses could tend to be spiteful or gratuitous. The responses could be careless ones. In this study there was no evidence of spitefulness. There were occasional low responses but as can be seen from Table No. 4 there were no strongly negative trends. The opposite case was more prevalent; that is, there was some evidence that students were over generous with their

Median Response Per Item Per Lecturer

Items

	10	12	16	22	23	24	25	27	30	32	32
1	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
4	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
5	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1
6	1	2	2	2	6	2	2	2	1	2	2
Item Median	1	1	1	1.5	1	1	1	1	1	1	

TABLE NO. 4 a

<u>Median Response per Item Lecturer</u>										
Lecturer	9	11	13	14	15	17	18	19	20	Lecturer Median
	1.	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.	5	2	3	2	2	2	4	2	2	2
2	3	1	4	1	1	3	4	1	2	2
3	6	1	5	1	3	4	5	1	1	3
4	2	1	2	1	1	5	2	2	2	2
5	2	1	5	1	1	4	4	1	-	2
6	2	2	5	2	2	5	1	2	-	2
Item Median	2.5	1	4.5	1	1.5	4	4	1.5	2	

Items Pertaining to Teaching

Table No 4b

Lecturer	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	21	26	31	Lecturer Median
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1	4	3	2	2	3	4	5	2	3	3	3
2	4	1	5	2	3	1	4	1	1	1	1.5
3	1	2	7	2	5	1	6	1	2	1	2
4.	3	2	4	3	5	3	4	2	3	2	3
5	4	1	4	-	4	-	3	1	1	1	1
6	4	2	3	-	3	-	2	1	3	3	3
Item Median	4	2	4	2	3.5	2	4	1	2.5	1.5	

Items pertaining to Courses

Table NO 4 c

Question No 2

		Too Easy			Difficult			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Too Difficult	1			1	2			2
	2						4	2
	3		2	6	3	2	3	3
	4				6	3	1	
	5		1	5	3	11	3	1
Question No. 6 Easy	6		3	2	2	1	2	4
	7	2	3	3	4	2	1	4

N=96

$r = - 0.18$

Table No. 5 a

		Not Enough Reading					Too Much	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Question No. 13	Too Much Reading							
	1	2	1		1	1	2	5
	2		3	2	3	3	3	3
	3	1	1	1	3	2	4	6
	4	3	1	2	5	4	2	6
Too Little	5	2		5		1		
	6	2	4		1	1	2	
	7	2	2			1	1	3

N = 96

$r = 0.23$

Table No 5b

Question No 17

		Too Much Homework					Not Enough	
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Question No 18	Too Little Homework	1		1				6
	2			1			6	2
	3			5	2	3		1
	4			1	8	1	4	9
	5		1	2	4		1	1
Too Much	6	2		3	4	3	2	
	7	4	5	5	3	3	1	3

N = 98

r = 0.42

Table No 5c

Question No. 30

Preferred
Different Instructor

Preferred this
Instructor

Question No 32
Enjoyed Instructor
Did Not Enjoy Instructor

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1				2	1	5	1
2		1	2	3		6	16
3	1		1	4		1	4
4	2			1	2		3
5							
6							1
7							

N=93

$r = - 0.40$

responses. Again from Table No. 4 it can be seen that while individual student differences of opinion are apparent with regard to teaching and course content, there is little difference of opinion about lecturers. The students seem to have been hesitant to criticize their lecturers personally.

The responses to the opposing items in the questionnaire do covary in the anticipated direction thus indicating that students paid some attention to their task. The correlations are however weak and it may be that some students found the negative wording of some of the items difficult to follow. This is a point to consider in revising the questionnaire.

In conclusion then this analysis gives some support to the notion that students do give honest and thoughtful feedback on teaching and course content. It is possible that the students feared being equally honest about their lecturers. Clearly then for lecturers to effectively use student feedback questionnaires the student must be more thoroughly convinced of having protective anonymity. The very existence of such student fears is case enough that university teaching is much in need of improvement.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. This course was too easy.
2. This course was intellectually stimulating.
3. This course was too theoretical.
4. This course was practical and useful for teachers.
5. This course was too difficult.
6. I would recommend that most teachers take this course.
7. Too much credit was given for the amount of work required in the course.
8. Not enough reading was assigned for this course.
9. The instructor had a good knowledge of his subject.
10. The instructor gave clear and understandable lectures.
11. The instructor was open and approachable.
12. Too much reading was assigned for this course .
13. The instructor encouraged his students to work hard and to do their best.
14. The instructor encouraged his students to participate in class.

.... /2.

15. The instructor was organized.
16. The instructor gave too much homework.
17. The instructor gave too little homework.
18. The instructor made adequate use of examples during his lecture.
19. The instructor demonstrated the usefulness of the course material for teachers.
20. The course content was consistent with the course title.
21. The instructor readily accepted students' questions.
22. The instructor was available to the students.
23. The instructor had a positive attitude towards students.
24. The instructor appeared to enjoy teaching.
25. I would take this course even if it were optional.
26. The instructor had professional attitude toward his work.

27. I would have preferred a different instructor for this course.

I can honestly say I enjoyed this course.

I can honestly say I enjoyed this instructor.

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